ever green

By: rumiberri
in truth, they were both still chasing after shadows [AU][No Magic]
Rated: Fiction T - English - Words: 14,249 - Reviews: 22 - Favs: 17 - Follows: 25 - Published: Nov 25, 2018 - id: 13130566

The sky is still pitch black when she steps outside. Into the empty sidewalks, she rubs her hands together, briefly regretting not bringing a set of gloves. She finds herself reluctant to turn back, and instead stuffs her hands into her jacket pockets for warmth. The overnight dew still hangs in the air, and her chilled breaths warm as she inhales, releasing into light wisps with every exhale.

As she walks, the bulky bag to her side swings forward, before it bounces back to hit her leg. The weight is familiar, comforting, a gentle thud in her ears as she moves. It isn't long until she catches a glimpse of light in the sky; the break of dawn, as dark slowly transitions to light grey. She turns away from the sight, hands still stuffed into her pockets.

She's crossing the street when the streetlamps suddenly flicker off, no longer needed as her surroundings grow brighter. She glances up to the clouded skies, breathing out slowly. Her hands slip out of her pockets, reaching for the bag to her side.

Ignoring the chill against her skin, her movements are precise as she slowly assembles the device. In a few minutes, she raises the object in her hands, bringing it to eye level.

There's a clear view of the street in front of her, surrounded by the row of cherry blossom trees found along the sides.

Her finger gently presses down, activating the mechanism with a small beep. A quick check, and satisfied with what she sees, there's a click as the shutter closes. She lowers her camera, eyes still staring at the scenery in front of her.

A new school year; a new start.

\\

She brushes down her skirt, a nervous gesture as she tries to ease nerves. Just as she is about to repeat the action, she forces her hands down, and instead gives the mirror another evaluating glance. She turns around, looking over her shoulder at her reflection. After a spin to face front, she takes a deep breath, before slowly exhaling.

She gives a small nod, and mutters an encouraging cheer under her breath. Stepping forward, she collects her bag from her desk. Once the straps are secured around her shoulder, she moves out of her room.

Stocking covered feet take her down a cozy hallway decorated with framed pictures, until she reaches the first door on her left. After a peek to the sleeping figures buried beneath their blankets, she continues on her way to the kitchen.

The hallway opens, revealing a small dining room and kitchen. She sighs softly at the mess on the dining table, but rather than irritation, it's a subtle sadness that's swallowed as she sets her bag down. Papers and books are stacked as she creates enough space for three people to squeeze in at the small, round table.

She glances to the wall clock hanging nearby, and blinks at the numbers that reads midnight. A quick dig through her pockets, and she pulls out her phone—automatically frowning at the sleek metal and polished surface—it's a light pink.

Her gift for passing her entrance exam.

A shake of her head, and a button on her phone is pressed, lighting the screen with the correct time.

The phone is slipped back into her pocket as she edges towards the kitchen. There's a transition from wood flooring to tile, and as she

steps inside, her hands reach for one of the aprons placed against the wall.

She slips the cloth on, and then ties the strings around her waist. In another few minutes, the stove is lit, and breakfast is cooking.

/

She's setting down the last plate of eggs when she hears rushed footsteps heading her way. Her head lifts, and as soon as the disheveled figure appears around the corner, she smiles to greet him.

"Good morning, Papa. Breakfast is almost ready."

He clears his throat, still trying to fit his arms through his robe and somehow grab one of the aprons in the process. "Sorry, Madoka, I overslept. Today's my turn to cook breakfast."

She hums noncommitedly, continuing her actions as she retrieves the toast from the toaster.

Her Papa finally manages to have his robes in order, and he claps his hands together. "Alright, I'll finish the rest of the preparations and you can take a seat, Madoka."

She sets the plate of toast down, a smile on her lips as she raises her head.

His light brown eyes behind his glasses peer at the table. "...You're done, aren't you?"

Her smile widens into a small grin. "Yes."

He hangs his head in shame. "I'm sorry. That's—the fourth time this month?"

Her grin disappears as she focuses on the plate in front of her. "It's fine, Papa. I know how busy you are."

He runs his hands through his messy hair, frowning. She steps closer, and despite the height difference between them, her hand moves forward to gently tap him on the forehead.

He blinks, and she slips her arms around him in a side hug.

"It's fine, Papa, you know I don't mind cooking breakfast. You do enough as it is."

He pats her gently on the back. "Today's your first day of high school though... it's an important day for you."

She frowns, pulling back to show him her face. "It's fine, Papa. Breakfast is already made, now eat it before it gets cold."

There's a pause, before he suddenly laughs loudly, causing his whole body to shake with laughter. He hugs her tightly, before letting go.

"I could never win against you or your Mama, and you're definitely becoming more like her every day."

Her smile slips for a second, but she catches herself and fixes her smile back into place. "I'll go wake Takkun, you can eat first, Papa."

"Takkun's already up, he should be down in a minute." He moves over to the refrigerator, opening it to pull out a carton of juice. "Juice?"

"Sure. I'll—"

He waves her away, "take a seat, Madoka. Papa can at least pour the juice."

She blinks, but the cups are already being grabbed, and there's not enough room in the kitchen for more than one person to be moving around.

Another glance, but her Papa's kind, yet tired smile has her brushing down her skirt as she moves to take a seat. She stares in front of her for a moment, but all too quickly the illusion is gone, and the soft clatter as a cup is placed on the table wakes her from her thoughts.

"Here you go, Madoka."

He's close enough that she can see the stubble on his chin; see the shadows underneath his eyes.

She smiles. "Thank you, Papa."

A loud yawn, and the shuffling of feet. "Morning," a sleepy voice calls out.

They both turn.

"Good morning, Takkun." She grins, "nice hair."

He sticks out his tongue in response.

\\

With a small exhale, she finally lowers her camera. She stares at the wooden sign for another moment, before glancing behind it. The school gate is only opened halfway, but should be fully opened once more students start showing up.

A fresh spring breeze suddenly sweeps through, scattering the fragile petals lying nearby. She follows them with her eyes, watching as they're carried away by the wind.

Unconsciously, she brings her camera back up, and takes another picture before the wind can die down.

She shivers lightly, once again reminded of the chill in the air.

Her attention quickly returns to the entrance, more specifically, to the large sign set up to welcome the new class of Mitakihara High School. Behind her glasses, her eyes narrow slightly, but she sighs and points her camera. With the sign in center focus, another photo is snapped.

Satisfied she has seen enough of outside, she steps forward, slipping past the sign to enter the school.

/

"Do you have everything?"

She double checks herself over in the mirror. "Yes, Papa."

"Student ID? Handkerchief?"

She brushes down her hair, frowning at how the ends bounce back up. "Yes, Papa."

"Your train pass? Do you need more—"

She turns around, interrupting his question with a hug. "Papa, I already checked everything three times. I have everything I need packed and ready. I'll be fine."

He sighs, and returns the hug. "Sorry—I guess I'm just nervous."

She smiles, hugging him tighter before pulling away. "I'll be fine. I double checked the route already, and I know which trains to take even if I take the wrong line."

He nods, looking more than a little dejected. "I'm sorry I won't be able to make it."

She reaches for her bag. "It's fine. I know you're busy."

"But dinner! I will definitely make dinner tonight!"

She gives her dad a grin. "I'm looking forward to it."

He kisses her forehead, stepping away with a smile on his face. "I'm really proud of you, Madoka."

"Thank you, Papa." Her lips quirk when she sees him lift his glasses to wipe his eyes dry.

Her kind-hearted Papa.

He hesitates, as if he wants to say something else. Instead, he excuses himself, "Papa needs to get ready now. Have a nice day at school, Madoka."

She smiles. "Thank you."

She watches as he walks down the hallway, turning left to disappear into the bathroom.

She counts to three in her head, letting the silence of being alone wash over her. She takes a deep breath, before breathing out.

There is one more thing she has to do before she can leave.

Squaring her shoulders, she heads towards the small room by the entrance. Gripping her bag tightly, she hesitates ever briefly by the doorway, until finally, she steps inside.

Her eyes are glued forward as she approaches the wooden structure in the corner.

After a long pause, she forces the words out, "...Mama, I'm starting high school today." She stops short in front of it, and reaches for a small metal rod. There's a hollow sound as she rings the bell. She clasps her hands together, closing her eyes and bowing her head. When she opens her eyes, they shine with unshed tears. She returns the rod, and then lowers her body to the floor, her school skirt pillowing around her. She absently readjusts it, smiling nervously at the same time.

"Sayaka-chan and Hitomi-chan will be there too..." She smooths down her skirt, eyes now staring at the floor. "...Truthfully, I'm wondering how it'll be like; I mean, I used to talk to Sayaka-chan everyday, and we still mail each other occasionally... but a lot of things have happened... I'm worried... about a lot of things."

She glances up, and the portrait of Kaname Junko smiling kindly stares back at her.

"...Mama—"

Her eyes prickle, and she blinks quickly, shaking her head.

"Ah, I need to leave now just in case I get lost." She slowly stands to her feet. She clears her throat. "Wish me luck, Mama." Her voice is soft.

She bows, and closes her eyes, waiting for the feelings to pass. After another long moment, and a deep, deep breath, her eyes reopen.

"Ittekimasu."

/

It's still early when she arrives at the station, and as she curiously looks around at the crowd, she's disappointed, but not surprised to find she is the only one wearing this style of uniform. When the

announcer calls out the arrival of the train, everyone lines up, waiting for their turn to board.

Once she finally steps inside, she immediately takes a seat by the door. As the train starts moving, she turns to the windows, lost in her thoughts as the urban landscape passes her by.

It's a long, quiet ride, but she's unable to fully relax as she's all too aware that each stop slowly brings her closer to her destination. She grips her bag tighter when she realizes the train will finally be crossing over the bridge. They pass the tall pillars at the entrance, and the large structures cast a dark shadow overhead. Before her eyes can readjust, they reflexively close as she's temporarily blinded by the morning sun. The pillars are behind them, and when she opens her eyes, it's an expansion of water in front of her.

She stares, mesmerized by the familiar sight of the bay.

Mitakihara.

She fights back the tears, reminding herself that she had decided this however many years ago:

She would find her way back.

\\

Students are now trickling into the courtyard, and she stands off to the side as she thumbs through the collection of pictures she has taken.

Some are standard: a view of the front of the school; the stairs leading to the entrance; a shot of the cherry blossom trees lining the entrance. And in between those, are arbitrary ones, taken on mere whims.

The camera beeps, and she realizes she has reached the end. She softly exhales.

She glances around briefly, aware of the growing crowd. The increase in activity makes her nervous, and she decides to take a few more shots, and then she'll continue further inside.

Her finger spins the dial, and she brings the camera back up to eye level.

/

One final check with her phone, before she snaps it closed. It's slipped into her pocket, but she keeps her hand around it, trying to calm her nerves.

"Madoka?"

She stiffens, hand tightly gripping her phone. She lets go just as quickly, and turns around.

She freezes—seeing familiar blue, and familiar green.

They had talked, but—

"Hey." Sayaka holds up a hand in greeting, a small grin on her face. "It's—been a while, hasn't it?"

"H-Hey," she responds, suddenly self-conscious.

It's been—how many years?

"Madoka-san."

Her eyes dart to the side, and Hitomi smiles at her.

She gulps nervously, pulling her bag closer. "...Morning."

"Hmmmmmmm."

They both turn their attention to Sayaka, who now has one hand on her chin, eyes narrowed in scrutiny.

Madoka squeaks, body turning as Sayaka walks around her, humming as her eyes run up and down the length of Madoka's body.

Sayaka stops suddenly, and Madoka waits, worried, wondering what she sees.

Sayaka's face lights up with a wide grin. Her arms shoot forward, and then come down to slap Madoka on her shoulders.

"Look at you! That adorable little baby faced Madoka. You've grown, haven't you?" Sayaka holds out her hand, placing it on the top of her own head, and then moving it so that it's on top of Madoka's. "A little taller, and," here her grin turns a bit devious as her eyes trail down, "a little 'bigger,' hmm?"

Madoka blushes, body tensing when she notices Sayaka now holding out her hands. "Uhm, Sayaka-chan...?"

"It seems like I need to do a little investigating, right, Hitomi?" Sayaka turns to Hitomi, eyebrows raised.

"Ahem," Hitomi coughs into her hand.

Madoka brightens—Hitomi had always been the one to calm Sayaka down—the so called voice of reason in their trio.

"Well," Hitomi glances to Sayaka, and then to Madoka. "...It has been a while, hasn't it?"

Sayaka nods, the grin never once leaving her face.

Madoka stares at Sayaka, already knowing she wouldn't be unable to outrun her. She swallows hard. "We're in—high school now, you know?" She takes a step back as Sayaka takes a step forward. "We're —in a public space...?" She glances to the side, judging the distance to the school gate: too far, she'd never make it.

She knows this, and yet—

She pushes her foot off the ground, loafers against cement as she tries to make a break for it.

She is fast—but Sayaka is much, much faster.

Hitomi smiles when she hears Madoka's familiar giggles as Sayaka mercilessly tickles her in front of their high school. It's nostalgic, and her smile grows fond when she realizes they're finally reunited after all this time.

She lets Sayaka continue for a little while, but as more and more students walk by, she becomes aware of the curious stares.

Hitomi steps forward, clearing her throat. "Ahem, perhaps that is enough 'investigating,' Sayaka-san?"

Sayaka doesn't hear her—she's laughing as well, and Hitomi knows it's up to her to get them back on track.

A few moments later, a sheepish Sayaka is apologizing to Madoka, who's trying her best to fix her clothes and hair back into place. With Hitomi's help, they have her back to her pristine appearance in no time.

Though Madoka's frowning, the three of them look at one another, before they start laughing.

Mindful not to mess Madoka's clothes up again, Sayaka ropes her arm around her smaller shoulders, while her other arm latches onto Hitomi's.

"...It's good to have you back, Madoka."

Madoka smiles, cheeks still sore and rosy from laughing. "Thanks, Sayaka-chan. It's—good to be back."

/

By stroke of luck, when they check the class assignments, Madoka and Sayaka end up being in the same class, while Hitomi is merely one room away. They make promises that they'll meet during breaks and lunch, and then the three of them split off to their respective classes.

"But really, it's good to see you again, Madoka. Who knew my adorable wife would get ten times, no, twenty times more beautiful." Sayaka nods to herself, and Madoka laughs lightly when she sees the smug expression on Sayaka's face.

"Sayaka-chan, you're over exaggerating." A bit of her earlier nerves creeps back in, and Madoka gives her a nervous smile.

She jumps lightly when Sayaka steps closer, bumping her shoulder. She looks over, and Sayaka gives her a wink.

"Come on, don't tell me you're nervous around me? Well, we do have three years to get reacquainted again."

The reminder makes Madoka smile wider. "Right—three years. It's—I'm glad to see you and Hitomi-chan, Sayaka-chan. It feels like I've missed so much."

Sayaka grins, once again throwing her arm around Madoka's shoulders. "That just means we need to get all caught up—see what we've missed."

As the bell chimes, the door to their classroom slides open, and a booming voice takes command as their homeroom teacher enters. "Alright, everyone please sit down, but don't get too comfortable as we will have to leave for the assembly soon. Before that, we'll get the seating arrangements all straightened out."

A chorus of groans sound off in response.

Sayaka quickly takes a seat next to Madoka, and they both watch as the teacher switches on the projector screen at the front of the class. A large image of the classroom floor plan flickers on.

"Find your name, and you'll find your seat."

More groans, followed by grumbles, and muffled movement as the students shuffle into order.

With her ball of luck still rolling, Madoka snags a window seat towards the front, in between a Kaga and a Manaka. Sayaka sits two seats behind her, and when she glances back, Sayaka winks in response.

"Introduce yourselves to your neighbors; you'll be spending a lot of time with them for the next few months."

Madoka glances around, and catches the eye of the student who sits to her right. They smile, and she smiles back.

Three years of this—didn't seem so bad after all.

\\

As soon as the break chime begins, she pulls out the smaller bag from under her desk, and hurriedly exits the room before anyone can approach her.

The hallways are already buzzing as friends rush to meet up, and she's half listening with one ear as conversations of the opening ceremony, of their homeroom teachers, of their fellow classmates spill out from the other students.

To her, the opening ceremony was uneventful, and there's nothing special about any of her classes; just another school, another year with unfamiliar faces.

At the closest stairs, she swings right, and ascends as quickly as possible. It is noticeably quieter as she climbs up.

At the base of the second floor, she takes a moment to catch her breath. After another cautious look from left to right, she swings right again, this time her feet leading her up to the third floor.

As she reaches the last step, she strains her ears, noticing the chatter of the other students have long since faded. The air here is at a standstill; the third years are absent today, and other than a few stragglers, this floor should be empty.

She lets herself relax, leaning against the wall as she waits until her breathing is under control.

In another few minutes, she pushes away from the wall, her hand moving automatically to the bag hanging from her side. Expertly, she locates the small buckle, and pushes the switch down to release the cover. A loud click echoes, and she freezes as she waits for the sound to settle.

After another still moment, she reaches inside the bag to pull out that familiar weighted object. She slings the camera strap over her shoulder, and satisfied with her preparations, she turns to the empty corridor. This school is larger than her middle school, and the long stretch of hallway fits at least ten rooms.

A brief moment to focus, and then the click of the shutter closing echoes in her ears.

The trance is broken all too soon when the speakers overhead play the warning chime. She lifts her head in disappointment as she realizes she needs to return to class.

A soft sigh escapes her mouth as she lowers her camera. Her hands drop back to her side, and she reluctantly turns around to head back to the stairs.

Before she starts her descent, she gives the hallway one last lingering glance. Another chime sends her forward as she continues back down to reality.

/

"... remember to think about your answers. The school year is only going to get more difficult as we progress. Three years might seem like a long time from now, but it'll all be over before you know it." The teacher glances at the clock, and a moment later, the chime rings. "Just in time. That's all for today. We will start again tomorrow bright and early. Class dismissed."

The newly appointed class representative stands up from her seat. "Stand," she tells the class. All twenty students follow her directions, and bow to their teacher, echoing their farewells for the day.

Their teacher grabs their laptop and projector screen, and with a wave, exits the classroom. As soon as they are gone, the students erupt into action, some packing their items to leave, while others convene with their friends to discuss afternoon plans.

"Should we head over to the club room?"

"I'm not sure if I want to join or not..."

Half listening to the nearby conversation, Madoka grabs her bag from the holder, and moves to carefully put away her laptop. This too had been a graduation gift, but she had grudgingly accepted it out of need rather than want.

"Madoka!"

She jumps in her seat, bumping her knee against the desk with an audible thump.

"Ouch," she winces, rubbing the offending spot as she glances up to greet the owner of the voice.

"Sorry," Sayaka grins sheepishly, though her eyes twinkle with amusement. "Good to see you're still just as clumsy."

Madoka sticks out her tongue, drawing her hand back to rest atop the desk. "That was because you surprised me, Sayaka-chan."

The grin remains on Sayaka's face. "Gotta pay attention to your surroundings, but anyways, are you going to check out any of the clubs?"

Madoka hums. "I'm not sure. What about you, Sayaka-chan? Are you going to join the softball club?"

Sayaka gives her a thumbs up and a wink. "You bet I am; last year's team was good enough to make it to the finals. The third years are graduating, but there are plenty of second years that showed potential even during their first year."

Madoka sighs, resting her chin into her hands. "You're lucky you already know what you want to join, Sayaka-chan. Do you know if Hitomi-chan will try for student council?"

"Knowing her, she'll be president by next year." Sayaka reaches forward, gently prodding Madoka's shoulder with an extended finger. "What about the gardening club? I remember you used to help your dad with gardening."

"Hmm, maybe."

"Did you want me to walk around with you?"

Madoka gives Sayaka a smile. "No, that's okay," she shakes her head. "You should go over to your club. I don't want to drag you around. I'll just head over to the quad and see if anything seems interesting."

"Are you sure?"

Madoka can tell Sayaka is itching to leave. "Yeah, I'm a big girl now. I'll be fine."

Sayaka hesitates, but Madoka gives her a gentle shove.

"Really."

Sayaka nods, offering Madoka an unsure smile.

When Madoka nods again, Sayaka looks relieved.

"Alright, I'll text you later tonight?"

"Sure. See you tomorrow."

Sayaka leans forward suddenly, engulfing Madoka into a hug. "It's really nice to see you again."

Madoka smiles, reciprocating the hug as best she can even though she is still sitting down. "It's good to see you again too, Sayaka-chan."

They hold their hug for a few more seconds, before they both pull back at the same time. With a wave and a murmur of goodbye, Sayaka turns around to head out the door.

Madola watches as her figure disappears round the door frame, before grabbing her own bag, and standing to her feet. She wasn't lying when she said she didn't know what club to join.

Maybe she really will check the quad to see if anything will catch her interest.

Shouldering her bag, she moves to exit the room. As she walks, she glances around, eying the various groups still remaining inside. She squares her shoulders.

She knows high school will be different.

/

It's nearing sunset when she arrives home. With a yawn, she shuts the front door, making sure to lock it behind her. She neatly leaves her shoes in the foyer, before continuing inside, hitting each light switch along the way.

At the living room, she stops, giving the unpacked boxes an evaluating glance. She decides she doesn't feel like unpacking today, and continues down the hallway. Her hollow footsteps echo in the empty apartment, the sound following her until she reaches her room; the floor there is carpeted, muffling her footsteps as she enters.

The light is flipped on, illuminating the unfamiliar bedroom.

One lone bed is stuck in the corner, with a small night desk to the right of that, decorated with a small picture frame she had purchased months prior. The white walls are as bare as the rest of the apartment, but she hopes to fix that in the upcoming months.

She might as well since she'll be here for three years, maybe even more.

She's tempted to sink into her familiar purple comforter, one of the few things brought from her aunt's house, but decides she'll get her phone call over with first, before doing so.

With a sigh, she makes a beeline to her bed, dropping onto it once she's close enough. She carefully sets down her camera bag on the floor, and then quickly digs through her school bag for her phone.

It takes her a moment until she finds it underneath her laptop. She pulls it out, and flips the metallic device in her hand, eyeing the smooth surface. It's a matte black, covered with a clear protective case. New, a gift when she had been accepted into high school, and a way for her aunt to reach her now that she's in Mitakihara.

She forces her hand to move, unlocking the screen with a swipe. The digital clock defaulted as her wallpaper tells her it's later than she had realized, and after a few presses on the screen, there's ringing in the phone speaker as she waits for her aunt to pick up.

Only when there's a click, does she put the phone against her ear, and a familiar voice greets her.

She takes a deep breath, and then slowly releases it. "Oba-san."

"Did you eat yet?"

She glances absently to her bag; there's probably a calorie mate buried in there somewhere.

"...No, not yet. I just got home."

"Did you buy groceries already? Knowing you you're thinking about skipping dinner." Her aunt's voice is matter of fact, enforced by her own weak response.

"I'm not that hungry."

"Homura, we had an agreement. You would take care of yourself if I let you live in your own. Your doctor told you you had to maintain your weight."

She frowns at the reminder. "I'm fine. I'll make eggs for dinner."

Her Aunt's voice softens, "...good. How was school?"

She shrugs. "Okay."

"Did you make any friends?"

She flops down onto the bed, unable to resist the comfort of her blankets. "No..."

"Well, that's okay. There's plenty of time for you to get acquainted with your classmates. There's no rush. As long as you make the effort."

She closes her eyes, "mm. Isn't it late? Did you already finish making dinner? Oji-san should be home soon. "

"Now," her aunt sounds exasperated, "don't try to get rid of me yet. I am capable of multitasking. We're having fried tofu tonight. I emailed you the recipe before, why don't you make that tomorrow?"

She cracks one eye open, focusing on the framed picture on her nightstand. "I'll have to pick some up at the market."

"You should." It's here that she hears the soft thuds of metal against wood; her aunt wasn't lying when she said she was doing two things

at once. "Did you stay late talking to your classmates? Did you find any clubs you'd like to join?"

There's an unasked question in her aunt's voice, but Homura doesn't take the bait. "No, I was just taking a tour around the school grounds." She pauses, before offering her aunt some information, "I did look around the quad briefly…"

"Oh?" The background noise stops, and she suddenly feels self-conscious. "Did anything catch your interest?" Her aunt's voice is encouraging.

She shuts her eyes closed. "No—" she cuts herself off, before trying to resume her thoughts, "there were a lot of people."

"Did you see anything interesting?"

"The—school's courtyard has cherry blossoms. I just—thought they were nice..."

"Did you take any pictures?"

It's a question asked as a formality as they both know the answer.

There's a long pause, long enough that the chopping starts up again. She listens to the rhythmic noise; with her eyes closed, she could pretend she's still in Tokyo, doing her homework as her aunt cooks dinner in the kitchen.

"I'll…" the words are heavy against her tongue, but she forces them out, "I'll send you some later if I take some."

"I would like that, thank you, Homura."

Suddenly feeling exhausted, she decides to wrap up their conversation. "I'm going to take a bath now before I make dinner."

"Alright. Promise me you're eating something proper?"

She quickly does a mental inventory of what's in her refrigerator. "I'll eat a sandwich..."

"I'll add some more money to your account for lunch. And don't hesitate to buy something on your way home if you're hungry."

Knowing better than to argue, she merely nods her head, creating light static as her cheek brushes again her phone.

"Alright, I'll let you go now. I still need to work on the soup. I'll talk to you later, Homura."

"Thank you, Oba-san. Good night."

There's a long stretch of silence as both wait on the line in case something important needs to be said.

When neither say anything after another moment, her aunt finally ends the call with a click.

She exhales, dropping her arms to rest on top of her comforter. She stares blankly at the ceiling, and it takes a few seconds until she can muster the energy to force herself to sit up.

Another glance at her night desk, before she pushes off from the bed to plant her feet on the floor.

"Guess I should eat dinner, huh…?"

Shoulders slumping, she sighs again.

Reluctantly, her footsteps drag as she makes her way to the door. "I can make rice balls," she mumbles to herself.

She'll have to drop by the grocery store tomorrow, or the day after if she really wants to push it.

Running her hand through her hair, she pauses when the strands end sooner than she is used to.

A new apartment, a new hairstyle, a new school.

She shakes her head lightly, and reining in her thoughts, she continues on her way to the kitchen.

/

"How was school? Did you end up meeting with Sayaka-chan and Hitomi-chan?"

Madoka nods, moving to grab her bowl of rice and chopsticks. "I did." She smiles, "they haven't really changed."

"That's good!" Tomohisa shares a smile with his daughter, "you were stressing so much that they wouldn't want to talk to you again. I knew that your old friends wouldn't treat you any differently. You chose them so they're definitely good people."

Madoka's smile turns sheepish, "I mean, we had stopped talking for a while…"

"You're just a worrywart, Nee-chan," Takkun interrupts with a mouthful of food.

Tomohisa frowns lightly, giving Takkun a look. "Takkun."

He quickly finishes his mouthful, before continuing. "All we heard from you these past weeks, 'What if they don't remember me? What if they pretend to not remember me?'" he mimics.

"Papa, do you want some juice?" Madoka suddenly asks.

Tomohisa pushes away from the table, the legs of his chair lightly scraping against the floor in his haste. "Let me get it, Madoka," he tells her, not letting her move.

She watches as he walks to the cupboard, and then turns to Takkun to stick out her tongue. "Well, I wasn't sure what would happen. I just wanted to be prepared, just in case."

Takkun sighs, "this is why Papa worries so much about you, Nee-chan. It's hard to believe you're in high school now."

Madoka raises an eyebrow at Takkun, "that's funny, because I'm sure someone was making a fuss when they started school. I wonder who that could have been?"

Takkun responds by sticking out his tongue, except it just so happens to be when Tomohisa sits back down.

"Are you two fighting again?" he asks them as he slides a cup of juice in front of Madoka, and then places a cup in front of Takkun.

"No, Papa," they both echo, voices in sync.

As he takes a sip of his juice, his eyes focus on Madoka, before zeroing in on Takkun.

They're both smiling, the perfect face of innocence.

He places his cup down as he cracks a smile.

"Eat up, Madoka! Papa prepared this dinner just for you. There's plenty more where that came from."

"I'm eating, Papa." Madoka nods to her plate still filled to the brim with karaage and vegetables and everything else her Papa had cooked.

She frowns when another spoonful of food is added to her large pile. "Papa, I can't eat all that—"

"You're still growing Madoka—"

"I don't want to be growing the wrong way, Papa!"

"You'll never catch up to your classmates, Nee-chan, and we'll never hear the end of it."

Tomohisa shovels a big spoonful onto Takkun's plate, "you too, Takkun. You're trying out for the soccer team, aren't you? You need to eat enough to keep your stamina up."

Takkun stares as his plate in horror. "Papa, I can't eat all this…"

"You're growing, Takkun," Madoka tells him, voice sounding smug.

Tomohisa smiles, gesturing for Madoka and Takkun to eat. "Eat up you two, before the food gets cold."

"Yes, Papa..." they both echo obediently.

/

After managing to finish most of her plate, Madoka is shooed away from the kitchen before she can volunteer to do the dishes.

"Papa didn't cook breakfast this morning, it's only fair," Tomohisa tells her as he blocks out her protests. "And Takkun will help me, won't he?"

Slouched over the table, Takkun lifts an arm in acknowledgement. "Don't you have homework or something to do, Nee-chan?"

"No, it's only the first day. It's fine, Papa, you made dinner so we're even."

Takkun lifts his head to rest his chin on his hand. "Don't you have to text Sayaka-nee-chan or something?"

Madoka huffs, "are you trying to get rid of me that badly?"

"Yes," Takkun tells her. "Me and Papa can handle this Nee-chan, so go do whatever you have to do."

Unsure and somewhat uneasy, Madoka glances to her Papa. He smiles in return.

Exasperated, Takkun throws his arms up, before stepping towards Madoka to push her out of the dining room.

"Hey, Takkun!" she resists, putting pressure on her feet as Takkun struggles to move her away.

"We can handle this—" he repeats. She is still much taller than him, and he groans in annoyance when she hardly budges.

"Takkun—"

"Madoka."

Their Papa's voice distracts her, and Takkun takes the opportunity to shove her away.

"H-Hey!"

"And stay out!" Takkun tells her, sticking out his tongue.

Knowing they are both just giving her a chance to rest, she finally caves in.

"Ugh, fine, I'll go pack my book bag or something," she tells them, making a show of stomping away in mock anger as she heads to her room.

As the sounds of running water slowly fade, her face softens. She knows she's lucky.

She reaches her room, and decides to reorganize her book bag. It doesn't take her long to finish, and she places her bag by her desk for tomorrow.

With a sigh, she looks around absently; she's still a bit too full to take a bath, and with the chores taken care of, and no homework assigned, the sudden free time has her feeling restless. She pulls her phone from her pockets, and blinks when there's the glow of green signalling she has a notification. As she unlocks her phone, she heads to her bed. She proceeds to drop down onto the soft mattress, arms held out in front of her, eyes staring at the phone in her hands.

It's a text from Sayaka.

She smiles; it really isn't a dream, she's attending Mitakihara High, and she's in the same class as Sayaka, and has plans to eat with both Sayaka and Hitomi tomorrow during lunch.

She quickly skims her messages, though it takes her longer to type out a reply.

In a few more minutes, they finalize plans to meet up in the morning, and have already offered their opinions on the new school year.

Sensing the end of the conversation, she leaves the phone by her pillow, and turns over to stare at the ceiling.

The school year has finally started.

She glances to the small desk calendar resting on her table. Today's date was circled with red ink, and she smiles as nothing had gone particularly wrong. Her expression falters when she realizes how close it is to the end of the month.

May—

She forces herself to look away, turning back to stare at the ceiling. A long sigh escapes her mouth, and she closes her eyes.

"School…" she mumbles to herself, trying to distract from the loud silence, "maybe I should look into joining a club…"

She sighs again, this time rolling over to rest on her side. Still full from dinner, she can feel herself drifting to sleep.

You'll gain weight if you sleep right after eating. Should I start calling you 'Maroka?'

"Mm, I won't, Mama…" she murmurs softly. Her breath catches in her throat as her words echo in her ears, and her eyes open when she realizes she has started to cry.

Now fully awake, she wipes the tears with the back of her hand. "Ahh, I messed up… Papa's dinner was too good, it made me sleepy and caught me off guard."

She grins to herself in amusement, but her expression slowly crumbles as she presses her hands to her eyes.

The wounds are no longer fresh, but some days are like today, where she is unable to withstand the crashing of the waves.

\\

If someone had told her independence would mean monotony, maybe she would have listened to her aunt, and stayed in Tokyo.

Wake up, go to school, go home.

Her expectations of high school had been lackluster at best, and she has a feeling these next three years will continue to pass by her in that same way.

Her aunt always asks her how she's doing, and she always tells her she's fine.

And she is, because she's not here looking to fit in.

She's here—

and she stops herself, because she doesn't have an answer.

/

She makes sure to not let herself slip again, and for a while, school is a nice distraction as she adapts to her classes, and tries to figure out which club to join.

"...so have you decided yet, Madoka?"

Madoka shakes her head as she places her bag onto her desk. They have already separated from Hitomi, who likes to arrive early to prepare for class.

"There's no deadline, but don't you think you should decide soon? Most new members would have joined by now."

Madoka sighs, "I know… I'm still on the fence. I did check out the cooking club earlier this week since Papa suggested it..."

Sayaka slides in close to gently elbow Madoka on her side, "look at you, trying to appeal to everyone with your skills, you sly girl you." Hand on her chin, she gives Madoka an evaluating look. She sighs, "well, when you become popular don't forget about me, Madoka, I was your wife first!"

Blushing, Madoka pushes the button to unfold her seat, and plops down on it as soon as its unfurled. "It's just something I like doing, and surprisingly, something I'm actually good at. I'm not sure if I'll join though..."

Sayaka points at her, "but from what I remember, your Papa cooks delicious food, and since you learned from him, yours is probably delicious as well. Being able to cook, ahhh, you're definitely adding points to your profile."

Madoka makes a show of unpacking her bag, if only to use the time to control her blush at Sayaka's words. "What about you, Sayaka-chan?"

Sayaka blinks, "what about me?"

"All this talk about popularity... I've been hearing rumours about a certain softball prince. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Sayaka grins sheepishly. "You're exaggerating."

Though her words say one thing, Madoka can easily see how Sayaka's trying to hide how pleased she is at the attention.

"Between you and Hitomi-chan, I may as well be chopped liver…" Madoka murmurs to herself.

"Hey don't talk about yourself like that Madoka!" Sayaka grabs Madoka, easily pulling her up from her seat. She ignores the protests and drags her over to where three other girls from their class are chatting.

They blink when Sayaka suddenly cuts into their conversation.

"Hey Sora, you think Madoka is cute, right?"

Mouth dropping open, Madoka flushes, trying to pull away from Sayaka as three sets of eyes zero in on her. "S-Sayaka-chan—!"

Sora hums. "She definitely has a certain charm to her, especially with that ribbon decoration clipped in her hair."

Sayaka nods, "right? Right? My wife won't lose to anyone in terms of cuteness."

Madoka tries to hide her face, missing their reactions from Sayaka's words. "Sayaka-chan…"

Sayaka pats Madoka's shoulder, "Mizuki, you're in the cooking club, right?"

The other girl standing besides Sora nods.

"How is it? Madoka went to observe your club the other day, but she's still on the fence about joining."

"Ah…" Peeking through the small space in between her hands, Madoka remembers seeing Mizuki there as well. She slowly lowers her hands, glancing to Sayaka as she realizes what she's trying to do.

Mizuki smiles, "from my point of view, I would say the senpai are very knowledgeable, and they're willing to share their experience with those that don't know how to cook, such as myself." She addresses Madoka directly, "it would be nice to have someone I knew in the club. Kaname-san, was it?"

"Ah…" Madoka nods. "But… uhm, Madoka is fine..."

"Then, Mizuki is fine as well."

Madoka offers her an unsure smile.

Sensing the lull of conversation, Sayaka takes initiative, asking Sora about her club, and asking the same to the third girl, Haruka, about hers as well.

"Haruka is in the photography club," Sora explains, "and I'm in the journalism club, so we kind of work together. They're always looking for people to join, so if you're still undecided, we would be glad to have you, Madoka-san."

"Ah…" Madoka nods, "maybe I could check it out..."

"The photography club is like that, right?" Sayaka asks as she holds out her hands, using her thumbs and index fingers to recreate a rectangle shape. She captures Haruka's face inside the rectangle, "looking good Haruka, give me your best pose."

Haruka grins, striking a pose as Sayaka mimics being her photographer.

Madoka smiles, laughing with the other girls as both model and photographer act over the top.

"Beautiful, absolutely stunning." Sayaka suddenly turns to Madoka, "ooh and who do we have here? Excuse me, are you a model? Can I please take a picture!"

Madoka rolls her eyes, but before she can reply, a voice interrupts.

"Ahem," Haruka clears her throat, and grabs Sayaka's arm, pulling her away. "I'm the model here, not her."

Her voice is sharp, and Madoka holds up her hands in defense, sensing the almost antagonizing tone.

Reading the sudden shift in the air, Sora swoops in, laughing at Haruka as she grabs Sayaka's other arm. "Technically, Haruka would be the photographer, and Sayaka the model."

Sora smiles, holding out her hand and placing it under Sayaka's chin like a microphone.

"And here we have the softball ace, aka softball Prince, Miki Sayaka. Tell me, Miki-san, how does it feel knowing that half the team followed you into the club due to your exploits in middle school?"

Sayaka scratches the back of her head, "ugh, you're exaggerating! No way did people join the club for me!"

Haruka switches gears, grabbing Sayaka's hand, "it's the truth, Sayaka-san! Even now, there's plenty of girls who look up to you! For me to even be in the same class as you…"

Madoka smiles as she hears the praises from the other girls; her smile lightly falters as she holds her hands together: this—is about a Sayaka she has never met before.

Unaware of Madoka's inner conflict, Mizuki turns to Madoka, "I heard you were her childhood friend, Madoka-san?"

Madoka jumps lightly at being addressed, but quickly collects herself. "Oh, uhmmm, yes, I knew Sayaka-chan back in grade school…"

"And you even know the future class president Shizuki-san, right?"

Madoka blinks, "Hitomi-chan…? Yes, she was in the same class..."

"Must be nice..." Mizuki sighs almost wistfully. "Ahh, I wonder how they were back then."

Madoka slowly nods, feeling her stomach churn uneasily. "Y-Yeah…" she murmurs softly.

Sora, Haruka and Sayaka are still joking around, and even after Madoka excuses herself, Sayaka doesn't notice until the first bell rings.

As she passes Madoka on the way to her desk, she gives her a questioning look that Madoka responds with a reassuring smile.

Before she can ask, the door slides opens, and in steps their home room teacher.

"Everyone take your seats!"

The class monitor stands on cue, "stand!"

Sayaka rushes to her desk, joining the other students as they stand to attention.

"Bow!"

"Good morning, sensei," everyone echoes.

"Sit!"

As one, the students take their seats.

Their teacher starts with the morning greetings as everyone turns on their laptops.

While Madoka waits for the login screen to load, she absently listens as their teacher announces upcoming events for this month. She knows Sayaka will ask about earlier the first chance she gets, and as she logs into her laptop, she tries to think of an excuse that will satiate Sayaka's curiosity.

/

Like clockwork, as soon as the bell chimes and class is dismissed for lunch, she pulls out her camera bag, and then her lunch bag, before she makes a quick escape out the door.

Lately, she's been eating behind one of the empty club rooms, but knows it won't be long until she'll need to find somewhere else. Today is still safe however, and she soon finds herself tucked away in her

usual spot, eating her store bought onigiri as she uses an overturned bucket as a chair.

She's not hungry, but as long as she eats something, she'll be able to field the questions from her aunt with half truths that aren't complete lies.

At least for now.

She forces herself to finish both, and after washing them down with a long drink of water, she neatly folds the plastic wrappers, glancing at their labels as she does so: chicken katsu, and seaweed. Once she's satisfied she has it memorized, she slips the wrappers back into her bag to dispose of later.

Lunch now finished, she zones out a bit as she lets her meal settle. Her gaze wanders around the surrounding area. With a building behind her, and a fence in front, this small pocket of space she is hidden in can only be described as being narrow. Past the fence sits an empty lot that may become something significant in the near future, but for now, it is the reason for her sanctuary to exist.

She closes her eyes, learning back against the wall behind her. She's still close enough to the field to hear muffled shouting coming from that direction.

She dozes off for a good ten minutes, until her phone suddenly buzzes as her silent alarm turns on. She quickly shuts it off.

After a yawn, and a brief stretch, she reaches for her camera bag to pull out her camera. She still has enough time to explore a bit before lunch ends.

A few clicks later, camera now ready, she packs up the rest of her belongings, and then hides the bucket in the corner. It'll be awkward holding an extra bag as she takes pictures, but it will save her time from having to come back here once the warning bell rings.

Once satisfied she has everything secured, she carefully approaches the corner. A quick check to make sure there's no one around, before she exits from the shadows.

She's not breaking any rules, but she's been having trouble with some of the other students due to their misunderstandings, and knows things will only get worse if she's caught hiding here.

If possible, she wants nothing better than to remain in the background for the next three years.

Comforted by the familiar heaviness in her hand, she continues walking, unconsciously looking around for anything that catches her eye.

\\

To her relief, and slight disappointment, a small lie is enough to keep Sayaka from pressing the issue further.

Five years really was a long time apart.

As Madoka eats her bentou, she listens as Sayaka tells a story regarding her softball club.

With a smile, Hitomi brings up the subject of a rumour, easily knocking Sayaka off course, and the two of them laugh in response.

Madoka smiles as the ache in her chest grows.

Yes, five years really was a long time ago.

Her silence is not unnoticed by the other two, but before they can address it, another group of girls interrupt. They are former classmates from Mitakihara Middle School.

They are introduced to Madoka, and they smile at her politely, eyes looking, but easily glossing her over as Sayaka and Hitomi draw their attention.

Their conversations involve their clubs and various gossip in the school, and only slightly interested, Madoka half listens as she eats her lunch.

"...right? And the other day, I saw that creep behind the gym. I bet you she's taking *those* kinds of pictures. When I demanded for her to

show me her camera, she ran! She was so slow, if Yumeko-chan hadn't called me I could've easily caught her!"

"Hmm, that sounds pretty serious…" Hitomi responds, eyebrows now furrowed.

Sayaka steps forward, punching one hand to her open palm, the sudden action waking Madoka from her daze. "Don't worry, I'll do something about this."

Madoka blinks, trying to piece together the story she has obviously missed as the group of girls surrounding Sayaka visibly swoon.

"Speak of the devil…"

Everyone turns as one of the girls points to their left.

"Ah! That's her!"

"Who is she trying to fool, with that camera hanging around her neck?"

"She's not even in the photography club, right?"

"No way, we'd never accept anyone like that!"

As far as Madoka can see, it's just another student, walking across the courtyard.

"Hmm," Hitomi's clear voice manages to cut through the chatter, and Madoka understands why that girl had called her the future student body president. "Well, there's no concrete evidence against her, and it's all speculation—"

"But—"

Hitomi smiles, cutting off any immediate protests. "I'll be on the lookout, and I'll have some of the school officers look into this with me. Please be assured that we will handle this."

"Thank you, Shizuki-san!"

Madoka takes another bite of her bentou, growing slightly curious about this new set of rumours.

She almost drops her chopsticks when an arm wraps around her shoulders as Sayaka takes a seat besides her.

"Why are you so quiet, Madoka! Don't tell me, you're scared about the creeper around campus?" Sayaka asks, completely oblivious to the other girls now glaring at Madoka.

Wary of the attention, Madoka tries to nonchalantly shrug Sayaka off, but finds it almost impossible.

"Say," Sayaka says as she leans in, staring at Madoka's bentou, "now that I look at this, it's pretty delicious looking. Did you make this? Can I have some?"

"Uhm," Madoka glances to the crowd, and then back to Sayaka's smiling face. She weighs her options. "… sure, Sayaka-chan…"

It's not her imagination that the air seems to grow heavy, but she ignores it as she looks away.

She vaguely realizes that mysterious figure has also disappeared.

\\

That incident, like many others, are pushed from her mind as a certain day draws near.

She still smiles when she sees Hitomi and Sayaka, but either they are too polite, or are too busy to notice that she's distracted as the weekend approaches.

When she departs from school after the half day on Saturday, instead of heading to the station to return home, she takes a slow detour further into the city. As she walks, some sights make her incredibly nostalgic; she still remembers wandering around with Sayaka, and then with Hitomi, before she had moved away.

After a visit to a nearby flower shop, she continues to her destination.

The closer she gets, the heavier the weight on her shoulders grow, and she's all but dragging her feet as she reaches the metal gates located at the entrance.

She takes in a deep breath, reminding herself to breathe. The cellophane bundled flowers rustle loudly, and she glances down at the sound. Unconsciously, her hands have tightened, and she forces herself to relax.

She's never been here on her own, but she has the route memorized. She heads to the main office first to grab some cleaning supplies, before continuing further in.

/

Bracing her arm against her leg, she holds the camera steady as she focuses on the transitioning sky. An orange tint has engulfed the normal blue, and the darkened sky is jam packed with the fluffy clouds that come hand in hand with the crisp spring air.

The shutter clicks rapidly, taking at least a dozen shots before she places the camera back to her lap. Gazing at the horizon, she takes a few minutes to enjoy the view of the sunset with her own eyes.

Absently, she realizes she's starting to get a bit cold, and tries to muster the motivation to stand and head home. Night will fall soon, and she estimates she has about a half hour until the street lamps flicker on, and another thirty minutes after that until she'll need to use them to guide her home.

Lazily, her eyes cut across the shallow steps in front of her. It's not much of a rise in elevation, but from this height, she has a clear view of the entrance, and the backdrop of the sky above it. It had caught her eye as she entered, and had captured her attention as she had been leaving.

Just as she's in midst of trying to convince herself to buy something fancier for dinner for a change, another one of those lonely visitors exits from the front gate. Even from this distance, the high pitched creak reaches her ears as the door swings open, and a moment later, it closes with the low impact clang of metal on metal.

She's far enough not to be immediately noticed, but a simple glance this way will reveal her presence. Not wanting to draw attention to herself, she drops her gaze to her camera, all while resisting the urge to stare.

She loses the battle, and sneaks another glance. The other girl has the same uniform as her, and she's sure she had seen the blue tie, indicating she is also in the same year.

Though outwardly composed, a little bit of panic rises from the pit of her stomach as she looks down at her camera.

What if—she is like those other girls, the ones spreading the rumours.

She feels a chill run down her back; she should leave.

She slowly starts counting in her head. Once she reaches fifty, she'll inconspicuously pack her camera and then somehow sneak away. As she counts, she stares hard at the camera in her lap, placing one hand over the other to stop herself from trembling in fear. She reaches halfway, and uneasily glances over, hoping the other girl has left or is in the midst of leaving.

She freezes, eyes widening when she realizes she's standing just a few steps away. Breath held, she watches as the girl walks past her to continue up the steps.

/

She had noticed.

Her uniform, her year colour, and the camera in her hands.

The numerous rumours regarding a suspicious character and their camera have been spreading like wildfire lately amongst the students, and the chance of running into someone that fit that profile is too much of a chance to pass up.

She had noticed, and curiosity had lead her over for a closer look.

And, as far as she can see, she's just another high school student, most likely caught up in a huge misunderstanding. She shakes her

head, reprimanding herself for latching onto gossip; rumours are often just rumours.

She knows this very well.

She continues up the stairs, mindful to keep enough distance between them as she finally decides to take a seat on the highest step. She brushes away the dirt, before sitting down.

The sun is half set, at the time when the remaining daylight casts ominous shadows that stretch across the ground. She sighs, body leaning forward, allowing her to rest her elbows on her knees, as she braces her chin in her hands.

This had to be the reason that person is here.

The view in front of her is breathtaking, but there's a different reason she suddenly finds it hard to breathe.

She silently wipes the tears from her eyes. They fall faster, and she hurriedly brushes them away. She regrets walking up here, and hopefully the other girl will leave soon, so she can cry in peace.

/

Other than the low howl of wind, it's quiet, enough that she can hear the occasional sniffles behind her.

She furrows her brow, fidgeting with her camera as she realizes she should probably leave.

She slowly stands up.

She doesn't know them.

Her hand reaches into her pocket—

If it were her in this situation, she'd very much like to be left alone.

She moves to descend—

But, she secretly would have wanted someone to reach out.

She stops, and then turns around to ascend the stairs.

The other girl is crying—silently weeping as she stubbornly brushes tear after tear away.

She takes a deep breath, hesitating briefly, before finding her voice. "...are you okay?"

\\

Her grief continues to spill out, taking the form of tears as she tries her best to keep them at bay.

She knows she needs to leave now before she flat out starts sobbing, but her pride keeps her glued in place.

As her vision blurs and she sniffles a bit too loudly, a quiet voice stills her hands.

She sniffles again, and wipes her eyes with her tear soaked hands.

She looks over—

Her breath catches in her throat—those eyes are lighter than her Mama's, and the shade of lavender isn't even close, but something about them makes her own eyes prickle once more.

Unable to stop herself, the tears flow faster. All too aware that she is making a spectacle of herself, she hurriedly tries to collect herself, silently berating herself in her mind.

"...tissue," the quiet voice tells her.

She blinks, and looks down as a packet of tissue is offered.

At this point, it's hard to pretend that she hasn't been crying, and she nods, before murmuring a soft thank you as she accepts the offered tissues.

\\

Hesitating, she opens her mouth, but it takes a few more seconds until she finally speaks.

"...are you okay now?"

The other girl nods, lowering her eyes in obvious embarrassment. Tissues are crumpled in her hands, evidence of her previous break down.

She glances around, noting how dark the sky is, and knows she's late for her daily call to her aunt. She's all too aware how chilled her skin is, and wants nothing more than to go home.

"Uhm, I'm okay," the other girl tells her quietly, as if reading her thoughts. "I'll be fine, so I don't want to keep you... Thank you, for the tissue..."

She glances over to the barely visible gate, knowing what lies beyond.

She isn't one to make assumptions, but—

She wants to go home, but instead, she brushes her skirt underneath her, and takes a delicate seat besides this stranger.

"...It's okay, I can wait until you're feeling better... There's... no one waiting for me at home anyways," she says softly.

The other girl lifts her head, at first confused, but her eyes widen with the realization.

She glances down at her lap, hands threading together nervously. From past experience, whenever conversations reached this point, only awkwardness or pity usually followed. But—

"...Does it... get any easier I wonder...?" the girl asks, voice a meek whisper.

She's not sure who the question is directed to, but the melancholic expression on the girl's face drives away her surprise.

After a long pause, her voice is even as she speaks. "...It's gotten cold, hasn't it?" Caught up in the moment, before she can stop herself, "uhm, I actually live not too far from here, if you'd like to clean up a bit..."

She looks over, letting the question hang in the air. At this point, it's too late to rescind her offer, and she's silently berating herself in her mind. What if this girl is dangerous? What if she had assumed wrong? What if—

The other girl laughs suddenly, wiping her face with the remaining unused tissues. "I must look horrible."

She shakes her head, hands held out in disagreement. "Oh that's—that's not what I meant—" feeling her face flush, she tries to stammer out her reason, but her mouth feels heavy already, a consequence from her lack of use. She drops her gaze, pulling her knees closer to her chest for warmth, "I… just thought, maybe you'd want to wash up…"

The silence that follows becomes her answer, but a sudden gust of wind has both of them shivering.

"Uhm…"

She lifts her head nervously.

The other girl smiles, "if… it's not too much trouble…" She holds out her hand, making sure to keep the tissues in the other, "I'm Kaname Madoka, but you can call me Madoka."

Another nervous glance, before she looks away. Shyly, she accepts Madoka's hand, giving her a weak handshake.

"Akemi… Homura…" she mumbles softly.

"Then, Homura-chan—"

Homura lifts her head in surprise, and is greeted with a gentle smile.

"It has gotten cold, hasn't it? Do you think we can go there now, unless you're still busy…?"

Rousing herself from her shock, Homura shakes her head, "n-no, I mean—we can go now… let me just—" Tongue tied, she stops talking, and moves back down to start packing her camera away, hoping her actions could convey her plans. Though she feels Madoka watching, the familiarity of disassembling her camera calms her down, and by

the time she clicks the buckle into place, she has more or less collected herself.

She stands, slipping the strap of the smaller bag around her shoulder, before grabbing her school bag in her hands. The other girl—Madoka—stands as well, looking at her expectantly.

A few seconds pass, until she realizes she has to lead the way, and with a small eep, and a point in the general direction, she starts the descent down the stairs.

"It's—just—a few blocks away…" she says almost breathlessly.

Once they reach flat ground, Homura continues to walk ahead while sneaking glances behind her to make sure Madoka is still following.

Finally, when Homura glances back again, Madoka surges forward, slipping her arm around Homura's and joining her at her side.

"It's cold, isn't it, Homura-chan?"

Homurs stares at their arms, and only realizes she has stopped moving when Madoka starts to drag her along the way.

"Eh—ah, uhm, y-yes…? It's—cold…"

Madoka slows down, letting Homura set the pace as they continue to walk to Homura's apartment.

/

"You can sit there," Homura points to a small two seated couch in the living room, "t-the bathroom is over there…" she points down the hallway, to the door on the right. "I'll make some tea…"

"Okay, thank you, Homura-chan."

Homura hurriedly heads down the hallway, disappearing further back to what she assumes is the kitchen.

Left alone, Madoka realizes how stiff her face feels, and heads over to the bathroom to wash up.

Through the same hallway Homura had entered, and after a glance at the opposite doorway that seems to lead to a bedroom, she enters the bathroom. The light switch is found along the wall, and after she waits for her eyes to adjust to the light, she shuts the door behind her. It's a simple, clean bathroom, with plain walls and nothing noticeable that would make it personalized.

Maybe Homura had recently moved in?

She shakes her head, knowing nothing good came from assumptions, and walks over to the sink.

She blinks as her reflection blinks back. She makes a face at her puffy eyes and disheveled hair.

"I really do look awful," she mutters to herself.

She turns on the sink, and lets the cold water run over her hands for a few seconds, before leaning down to splash her face. The cold feels nice on her skin, and she repeats this a few more times. She shuts off the faucet, and with water dripping down her face, digs into her pockets to pull out her handkerchief.

Once her face is dried, she stares back at her reflection.

It's not much better, and she knows she can't return home looking like this.

Her eyes widen.

She quickly turns around, hurrying to throw open the door in her haste to get to the living room.

She's digging through her bag, and making a mess when a quiet voice interrupts.

"Uhm… is everything okay…? I heard—running…"

She briefly glances over, noting the purple apron Homura has now donned, before turning back to her bag to continue her search.

"I forgot—" she explains as she pulls out her laptop and places it aside. She peers inside her bag, and finally sees a sliver of metal

poking in between her notebooks. "—I told my dad I'd be home late," she continues as she grabs her phone, "but it's already later than I had planned."

She frowns when she sees how many missed calls she has. She flips open the cover, and immediately hits the quick dial.

As the phone starts ringing, she hears Homura excuse herself, but when she turns around to acknowledge her, Homura is already walking back into the kitchen.

There's a click on the line, "Papa—"

"Madoka! Are you okay? Is everything alright? Where are you? Tell me where you are right now—"

The panic is evident in his voice, and she feels the guilt churn in her stomach. "Papa—I'm fine! I'm at—a friend's house—"

"Sayaka-chan's—"

"Someone from school—"

"Are you with a boy?!"

Face flushing, Madoka sits up. "Papa! I'm fine!"

"A girl?!"

"Papa—"

"Madoka, tell me where you are—Takkun, what are you doing, I'm talking to Madoka—"

She hears Takkun's muffled voice in the background:

"Papa! Nee-chan is fine, remember she said she would be home late —"

"Do you know what time it is—"

Takkun's voice is suddenly louder, "Nee-chan, you better tell Papa what you were doing."

Madoka sighs, shoulders slumping.

"Madoka?"

She closes her eyes, and reluctantly forces the words out. "...I was visiting Mama." She grips the phone tightly, feeling her eyes watering, "I know we're visiting tomorrow, but—" she swallows heavily, voice dropping to a whisper, "I… wanted to visit her alone…"

"Madoka…"

She angrily wipes her tears away, frustrated more with her lack of self-control than at anything else. "I'm sorry for not telling you. I was going to be home earlier, but…"

"...No, I'm sorry for overreacting, you're in high school now, and it's not like I don't trust you..."

They both fall into silence, Madoka taking the time to collect herself, as her Papa becomes lost in his thoughts.

Finally, "will you be heading home soon? Do you want me to pick you up?"

Madoka checks the time. She sits back down, feeling drained. "I'll head to the station in a bit."

"I can drive to Mitakihara—"

"It's more than an hour away, Papa."

"That's—"

"I'll call you when I'm close to our stop." Her voice is firm, and he hesitates, but she can hear Takkun speaking in the background. She smiles, knowing her little brother has her back.

"...Okay, I'll pick you up at the station. Text me when you leave?"

"Of course, Papa."

"Madoka, you're—" he cuts himself off, "I trust you. I'll talk to you when you get home."

She nods to herself, still smiling, "thank you, Papa."

"I love you."

"Love you too, Papa. And tell Takkun thank you."

"I will. See you soon."

Madoka smiles, "thank you, Papa. I'll be home soon."

She knows her Papa will never hang up first, and she pulls the phone away to end the call. Gripping her phone in both hands, she breathes out slowly.

She lifts her head when she hears light footsteps.

Homura hesitantly approaches, holding a tray with two cups, and a plate of snacks in between. She meets Madoka's gaze briefly, before looking away. "...is everything alright?"

Madoka sighs. She stares at her phone for a moment, and then turns to Homura. She opens her mouth, but immediately snaps it shut.

Homura blinks.

Madoka shakes her head, mouth feeling heavy as if filled with cotton, "nothing—i was just—nothing, nevermind. Uhm, is that tea for me?"

Homura looks away, "...sorry. I—wasn't eavesdropping, but—voices tend to carry down the hallway…"

Embarrassed, Madoka bows her head. "You heard everything…?"

The footsteps grow closer, and when Madoka looks up, Homura is besides her.

"Would you like some tea before you head home…?" she gently asks.

Madoka hesitates, but she caves in a second later.

"Thank you, Homura-chan."

Homura pauses, but nods over to the small foldable table pushed against the wall. "Can you bring that over to the couch...? It's the only table in the living room..."

Madoka scrambles to her feet, "sure," she tells her as she goes to retrieve the table.

/

With the table set, and both of them settled on the couch, Homura waits until Madoka takes a few sips of her tea, before addressing her.

"Uhm, Kaname-san…"

Madoka chews her cookie slowly before swallowing. "Madoka is fine," she responds.

Homura's eyebrows furrow, and she looks away.

"Ma…" her voice trails off as she mumbles the rest of her name.

Noticing Homura's blush, Madoka lets it go—she has a feeling she'll need to ease into it, otherwise Homura might just run away.

Madoka takes another sip, letting the tea warm her body.

After another struggle, Homura decides to completely forgo addressing her and merely continues, "...uhm, earlier, you had asked if it gets easier…?"

Madoka nods, finished with her mouthful as she places her cup down. That sudden warmth surrounding her body is gone in a flash. "…I lost my mom five years ago," she explains. The words feel hollow in her ears, and she pauses, wondering how to continue.

Homura sits back against the couch, and they hear the rustle of fabric as she readjusts in her seat. Still quiet, she reaches for her cup, warming her hands on the surface.

"I'm sorry, you must miss her a lot."

Madoka nods, and reaches for her cup as well. The ceramic is warm to the touch, but her whole body feels cold. She takes another sip, hoping it'll take away that feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Homura hums softly. "What kind of person was she, if you don't mind me asking…?"

Madoka leans back, pressing her body against the couch as she tilts her head to stare at the ceiling. "Mama… I mean, my mom was…" she breathes out slowly, but her mouth tugs into a smile, "she was strong. She was smart, and pretty, but also kind and understanding. It felt—" she clears her throat, eyes blinking rapidly as she tries not to cry, "it felt like nothing could bring her down… she was—amazing…"

She brushes away a stray tear. Frowning, she brings the tea cup close, hoping the liquid will keep her tears at bay.

Homura remains quiet, occasionally drinking her tea as she waits for Madoka to compose herself.

After another moment, Madoka turns the question around. "What… about your mom, Homura-chan? What... was she like?"

"What was she like…?" Homura murmurs. "I'm not sure… I don't really remember her much. She passed away—both my parents passed away when I was young. I think I only saw them a few times a year… they were always busy working, and traveled a lot."

Madoka looks down. "I'm sorry…"

Homura shakes her head. "No," she quickly corrects herself, "earlier, when I said—it's not like I don't have anyone—my aunt and uncle took me in when my parents were gone. I'm much closer to my aunt than I was ever to my mother…" she mumbles this softly, and Madoka has to strain to hear.

Madoka tilts her cup back, and is surprised when only small sip of tea is left. She lowers her cup to the table, and the rattle of dishware pulls Homura from her thoughts.

"Ah, it's getting late isn't it? I shouldn't keep you any longer…"

Madoka smiles, slightly confused. "But it's not your fault—I'm the one that's intruding on you. Thank you, Homura-chan."

"Mm…" Homura avoids looking at her, and Madoka is sure she can see a slight blush across her pale cheeks. "It's dark out, so I'll walk you to the station."

Madoka waves her hands in front of her, "no, that's okay, Mitakihara is pretty safe, I'll be fine on my own."

Homura's cup joins Madoka's on the table as she sits up. "But—"

"Plus, then I'd be worrying if you made it back safely the whole trip home…"

Homura blinks. "Then… I'll walk you to the end of the district at least, it's a bit confusing maneuvering through since some streets are closed for construction."

Madoka sits up, following Homura as she stands to her feet.

Light lavender peers at her carefully, "will that be alright…?"

Madoka hesitates, but nods. "Sure, if it's not too much trouble, Homura-chan."

"Let me grab a jacket…" Homura pauses, giving Madoka an evaluating glance, "would you like to borrow one? It's chilly out now that the sun has set."

Again, Madoka hesitates. "I don't want to impose…"

"I'll be right back."

As Homura disappears down the hallway, Madoka double checks to make sure she hasn't forgotten anything from when she had cleared her bag during her search for her phone. When everything seems to be in order, she heads to the bathroom, knowing she still has some time until she'll arrive home.

She's in the midst of putting on her shoes when Homura returns. She's now wearing a dark purple jacket, looking nice and toasty, and also holding a bundle of cloth around her arm.

"Here you go, it might be a bit too big, but it's warm."

Madoka blinks as a dark grey jacket is pushed into her hands. "Oh, that's okay—"

Homura holds it out, refusing to budge. "I'd feel horrible if you caught a cold because of me…"

The words serve their purpose, and with a sigh, Madoka accepts it, and puts it on. The sleeves go past her fingertips, but the length of the jacket itself is only a bit longer than her normal. She smiles to herself: she has grown.

"Is it okay? Should I try to find another one?"

Madoka shakes her head, unconsciously sinking into the collar, savouring the warmth. "You're right, this is warm. And it's not too big. Thank you."

Homura nods slowly, and then moves to unlock the door. "Did you get everything?" she asks as she slips on her shoes.

Madoka pats the bag to her side. "Yes, I made sure I didn't leave anything behind."

Homura opens the door, and holds out her arm, "then, after you, Kaname-san..."

Madoka smiles as she leads the way out the door. The outside hallway is definitely colder, and she snuggles against her borrowed jacket, glad that Homura had insisted for her to take it.

After double checking the lock, they continue towards the exit, Homura walking slightly in front as they maneuver the hallways, stopping once they reach a large set of wooden doors.

It creaks heavily as Homura pushes it open, and both girls pause as the cold wind immediately hits their faces.

"It's hard to imagine it'll be summer soon with this kind of weather," Madoka mumbles as she stuffs her hands into her pockets.

"Mm," Homura agrees.

With the large apartment complex looming behind them, they start the short walk to the end of the district in silence.

As her eventual departure point approaches, Madoka suddenly turns to Homura, "Homura-chan."

Homura stops walking, and turns to address the other girl. "Yes, Kaname-san…?"

Madoka hesitates, but forces the words out, "... can I visit you again? Er… that is, if it's not too much trouble…"

Homura blinks, surprised at the question. "W-Well, I still need my jacket back… unless, uhm, you weren't going to return it…"

Madoka shakes her head, "no! I mean, yes, I'll definitely return it… but, I meant, after that…" She fumbles her words, suddenly feeling tongue tied. "I mean, can I get your class number...? We can meet up at school, and maybe have lunch together …?"

To her surprise, Homura takes a small step back, "it's... probably not a good idea to talk to me at school…"

Feeling her mouth grow dry, Madoka winces, obviously hurt from the rejection. "O-Oh… sorry, I was—over stepping… I thought…"

What did she think, that just because someone helped her that they wanted to be her friend?

"It's not that," Homura tells her, hand on Madoka's arm to keep her from running away. "Just—it's probably better if you didn't talk to me at school…"

"I don't understand—"

Homura lets go, turning her face away. "I'm sure you've heard the rumours…"

"Rumours…?"

Homura gives her a sad smile, "you've seen my camera…"

Madoka frowns, "camera…?" She blinks when she pieces the two together. "But—that's not what you're doing, right? They're just assuming because they saw you nearby. You're just taking pictures, aren't you?"

Homura draws back, "maybe, but it doesn't matter, no one will believe me," she says softly. "Will you be able to find your way to the station from here?"

Madoka reaches forward to grab Homura's hand. "Rumours are just rumours, Homura-chan. I believe you."

Homura averts her eyes, unable to meet Madoka's earnest face. Her hand is warm as Madoka holds it tightly.

She knows she'll regret it if this ends up being one big joke, but her aunt's encouraging words repeats in her mind.

Reluctantly, but secretly hopeful, "...I'm in 1-F," she tells her.

Madoka grins, "I'm in 1-C. I'll drop by your class on Monday to return your jacket." Suddenly conscious that she's still holding Homura's hand, she lets go. "I-If it's alright, can I have your mail address…?"

Homura shyly glances over. She's in too deep already— "Uhm… sure…"

They exchange information, and with promises of seeing each other at school on Monday, they split up as Madoka heads to the station while Homura returns home.

Madoka smiles to herself, tucking her hands into the jacket pockets as she picks up her pace. Even if today had started off not too good, it had ended on a high note with her making a new friend.

Maybe, things really will turn out oka**y.**

AN: ooh… Another story? you ask. Another story, I say. What about the other ones? you ask. What other ones? I say. just kidding... maybe... As always, i'm surprised anyone is reading, but thank you to

anyone that did, and thank you to those who also take the time to review.